

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON

DOUBLE DUTY

THE EXPERIENCE OF ONE FAMILY WHEN BOTH PARENTS DEPLOY

Deployment preparation is important. For a family, especially when both parents are Airmen, it is even more critical. Tech. Sgt. Christina Gamez learned from her husband's previous deployments she doesn't have to plan everything on her own.

The first time her husband deployed, she wanted to do everything herself. She said her independence frustrated the friends who wanted to help. This time, Sergeant Gamez knows she needs a support network when her husband leaves. Especially since she, too, departs a few months later.

Master Sgt. Rodolfo Gamez of the Air Force Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Agency at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, was scheduled to leave in July for combat skills training at Fort Polk, La., before a 365-day deployment to Afghanistan. Christina, a financial analyst in San Antonio, is to follow her husband in December for her own 365-day voluntary deployment to Afghanistan.

The couple plan to blog about their experiences so other

Airmen can "know before they go." Christina said she hopes to encourage deploying Airmen to be well prepared, to look at every possible angle and to have a backup plan for everything that could possibly come up.

"I don't think I was prepared at all that first time," she said. "I didn't know how hard it was going to be. But, you can adapt. It's going to be tough and you never know what to expect. You just get through it ... there are so many resources out there for you if you're just willing to accept them."

Christina said she plans to share through a blog how her family prepares before deploying and how they cope with the separation from each other and their two children, 4-year-old Tomas and 2-year-old Eva.

She says the children are accustomed to their father being away because they've experienced two of his five deployments and he often travels for work. Rodolfo is usually away 10 to 14 days each month. This time will be different. Both mom and dad will be gone for a much longer period.

Christina's parents will take the children when she deploys. In addition to completing the Air

Force's deployment checklist, and having a solid family care plan, the parents continue to prepare Tomas and Eva for the transition to a year with their grandparents.

They are keeping a journal for their children to read, "so they will know what we were thinking and feeling, leading up to the deployment and while we were away from them," Christina said.

They've established goal dates so the children can mark them on a calendar and earn various rewards. They have also started gardens that each child will help tend at Grandma's house.

Once the couple found out Rodolfo was set to deploy again, Christina had her chief call to find out where she stood on the deployment roster. She learned the Air Force Personnel Center already knew her name, and she was on the short list. She would likely be tasked in the next two to three months because there were several more deployment slots coming down the pipeline. At that point the couple decided to take positive control of the situation and lessen the time the family was separated.

They decided Christina would volunteer for her own 365-day deployment to lessen the impact on the family, especially on their children. The Gamez family believes their experience shows the importance of knowing where they stand in the deployment cycle.

"The last thing we wanted was to be unaware and to get caught off guard with me deployed and then find out she has to follow shortly after," Rodolfo said. "So in the interest of being proactive, we found out

she was No. 2 on the list and we had a difficult decision to make."

Rodolfo said knowing they would both deploy anyway, the two decided Christina would volunteer for a location and deployment that would minimize time away from the children and put them as near each other as their individual missions would allow.

As the departure dates draw closer, the family is spending as much time together as possible. They recently took a trip to Disney World in Orlando and are planning a return vacation to Florida the spring after the sergeants return from Afghanistan.

Rodolfo and Christina said they're confident their preparations will ensure that their children are in the best possible situation while they're away. This is just one reason why having an updated Air Force Form 357, or Family Care Certification, is important, they said.

"It's vital," Rodolfo said. "It's no different than a will because you never know when you're going to get caught in a situation. Fortunately for us, we've got a great supporting cast. Those people outlined in our family care plan are there and we've got more people volunteering to provide that support."

"Good planning meets opportunity and that's how you achieve success," he said. "I think we've done so with our family care plan, and we're well-prepared to make this transition."

Christina said she hopes her blog will help fellow Airmen make those hard choices and encourage them to follow through on their own preparations.

Master Sgt. Rodolfo Gamez and his wife, Tech. Sgt. Christina Gamez, hold their children, Tomas, 4 and Ava, 3, for a portrait outside their home. The sergeants are set to deploy for year-long deployments within months of each other.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis III

